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Death of President Lincoln

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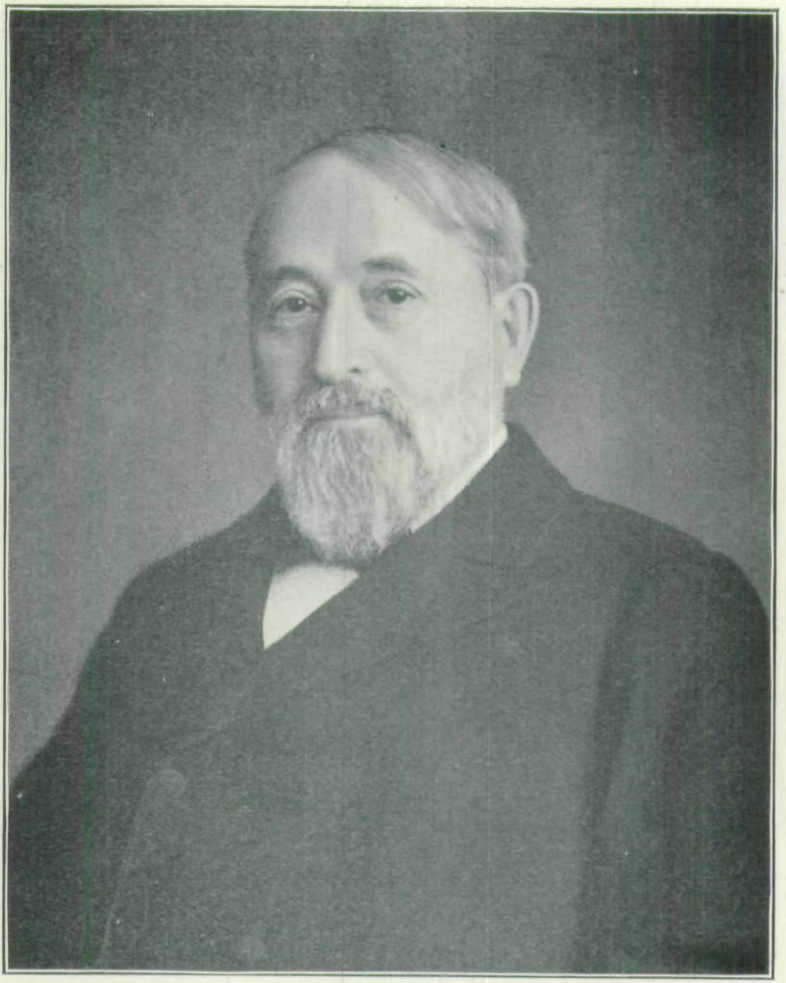

Yours respectfully,
Frank W. Palmer.

FRANK W. PALMER.

Editor of the *Dubuque Times*, 1858-'60; State Printer and Editor of *The Des Moines Register*, 1861-'68; member of Congress, 1869-'73; Editor of *The Chicago Inter-Ocean*, 1873-'76; U. S. Government Printer under the Harrison and McKinley administrations.

ANNALS OF IOWA.

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DEATH OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN.

AN ADDRESS DELIVERED BY HON. F. W. PALMER* AT A MEETING OF THE CITIZENS OF DES MOINES, IN COURT HOUSE SQUARE, ON SUNDAY, APRIL 16, 1865.

Citizens of Des Moines:—On this consecrated day, when the Christian nations of all climes are assembled in their several places of worship to render homage and thanksgiving to the Ruler of the world for His manifold blessings, we have convened to bend together in deepest lamentation over tidings of national loss such as the country has never known. There has been no reverse to the Federal arms, on land or sea! No foreign power has allied itself with our foes, to menace our borders, or check the triumphant march of our legions. But in the hour of greatest triumph, when friend and foe alike were exchanging congratulations that the great conflict of devastation and of blood would be soon ended, the appalling intelligence comes to us on the wings of the lightning, that Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States,

*Frank W. Palmer was born in Manchester, Ind., Oct. 11, 1827. His parents removing to the state of New York during his boyhood, he was apprenticed to Adolphus Fletcher of *The Jamestown Journal*, to learn the printing business. After learning his trade, at which he worked some years, he became the editor and joint publisher of that paper (1848-58). Removing to Iowa during the latter year he became the editor and one of the proprietors of *The Dubuque Times*. He was elected State Printer in the winter of 1860, which brought him to Des Moines. He purchased *The Iowa State Register*, then a weekly journal. He held the office of State Printer until 1868, during which time he published the admirable reports of Adjutant General N. B. Baker, which were made very voluminous by reason of the Civil War. He was elected to Congress, serving from 1869 to '73. In the latter year he became editor-in-chief of *The Chicago Inter Ocean*. He served as Postmaster of Chicago from 1877 to '85. President Harrison appointed him Government Printer, and he was reappointed by President McKinley. He projected and secured appropriations for the construction of a Government Printing Office which is now (1900) in process of erection, at a cost of $2,429,000. It will undoubtedly be the finest and most superbly appointed printing establishment in the world.

has been murdered in a public assemblage, at the national capital, and that William H. Seward, Secretary of State, while lying a helpless invalid at his own residence, has been brutally assassinated in the presence of his family. Before the era of Christian civilization, when war was regarded as the sublimest occupation of men, and among savage tribes where personal brute force was elevated above reason, such horrors as these were not uncommon; but considering all the circumstances surrounding these events—the period of the world in which we live, the purposes for which and the men by whom the government was founded, the ordinary potency of law and the sanctity of individual rights, the general expectancy of a cessation of hostilities at an early day, the decreasing malevolence engendered during the long civil war, the time and manner of the assassination, the invariably kindly personal natures of the distinguished officials—all combine to make these deeds more wantonly horrible than any which have a record in national history. The mind can hardly grasp their enormity, or comprehend their consequences to the country.

The president and his premier have not thus fallen by violence because of any personal wrong they had inflicted on any human being. They were called by the people of the United States, and in part by you, citizens of Des Moines, to administer the duties of the highest governmental positions. They had taken an oath in the presence of the Nation and in sight of Heaven, that they would discharge those trusts. They were the agents of the people. They acted, by your voluntary authority, in your stead. The blow aimed at their lives, was intended for you and your national cause. The poor dumb mouths of these public servants need not be opened to inform you how faithfully they executed the popular will. The history of the country will tell you and the generations which shall come after you of the anxieties, the labors, the sacrifices—even at last to martyrdom—which they made in your behalf.

If you exacted unreasonable measures of official power from them the responsibility for their fall rests upon you. What did you require? Simply that they should preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States and enforce the laws passed in accordance therewith. When President Lincoln was inaugurated on the 4th of March, 1861, he found a pretended government organized to defy his power. Seven states, viz., South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas, had passed ordinances of secession, adopted a constitution for a new confederation, and invited all the remaining slaveholding states to follow their example. With a rebellion thus formidably organized, what could the president have done, save that which he did? He might, indeed, have been severe in his threatenings. He might have instantly inaugurated rigorous measures of punishment. Did he do it? He thought the law of kindness might be stronger than the civil and the military law, and this was his first appeal to the seceders: "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict, without being yourselves the aggressors. You have no oath registered in heaven to destroy the government, while I shall have the most solemn one to preserve, protect, and defend it. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic cords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearth-stone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as they surely will be, by the better angels of our nature."

When the inaugural address, of which the foregoing was the concluding portion, was read in the Confederate Congress, it was said to have been received with derisive laughter. Its reception there in no manner affected the President.

He still had hope that armed collision might be avoided. He knew that rebellion had been threatened during the administration of Washington, and had been avoided; and during the administration of John Adams, and been avoided; and during the administration of Jackson, and been avoided. He seemed determined that no seemingly aggressive act of his, should make his presidential term the first to meet the responsibilities of civil war. Even when two self-styled commissioners from the rebel government, viz., John Forsyth and Martin J. Crawford, appeared in Washington to insult the government with propositions for recognition of Confederate independence, he permitted them to come and go in personal freedom, instead of arresting them and hanging them, as he might have done. He knew that in North Carolina, Alabama, Virginia and Tennessee desperate measures were in progress to precipitate the people into secession, and that if these and the border slave states could be saved to the Union by conciliation, the result would compensate for the utmost effort. His labors were in vain. All save Delaware, Maryland, Missouri and Kentucky resolved to take the treasonable plunge, and three of these states were saved to the cause of loyalty almost in spite of themselves. When the inevitable conflict at last came, he called the nation to arms, and they responded in numbers vastly beyond the capacity of the government to receive or equip them. The first great danger, viz., that of the seizure by the enemy of the national capital, having passed, the President was unwilling to commence an aggressive military policy. The Federal troops in Virginia were kept within the shadows of the Federal forts for fear that their presence might be construed into a purpose to invade and subjugate the state. The rebel army in no manner reciprocated this unwillingness to precipitate collision. They appeared in formidable numbers in front of our forces and, at last, in response to the clamors of the masses, the advance was ordered which resulted in the disaster of Bull Run. A positive policy of war

being now forced upon the president, he undertook the great work of organizing from the ranks of citizens familiar only with the avocations of peace an army and navy sufficient to defend the government from overthrow. From the first, very many of the party who had elevated him to office had been urgent in their advocacy of measures of emancipation, as the surest, quickest road to peace. In the judgment of the president, the hour had not arrived. General Fremont, while in command of the Department of the West, issued an order declaring the slaves of all men who had taken up or should take up arms against the government, free. The president revoked the order. Not long afterward, Simon Cameron, then secretary of war, urged the policy of arming the blacks. The president withheld his assent. Gen. Hunter, while in command upon the Atlantic coast, attempted military emancipation. The president prevented it. At last, however, in the summer of 1862, the conviction was pressed imperiously upon him that slavery and the government could not be both preserved, and that the hour for the separation had come. He accordingly appealed to the border slave states to inaugurate as a voluntary policy of their own, compensated emancipation. They declined the invitation. He knew that as a war measure he had the power to abolish slavery. As long ago as when John Quincy Adams was a member of congress, the latter declared publicly in debate, and no man disputed his proposition, that in the event of war slavery would be as much at the disposal of the general government as any other local institution. Alexander H. Stephens, previous to the secession of Georgia, made substantially the same declaration. Believing that the exercise of that power had now become with him a public duty, he issued on the 22d of September, 1862, a preliminary proclamation of emancipation declaring that on the first day of January, 1863, "all persons held as slaves within any state, or designated part of a state, the people whereof should then be in rebellion against the United States, should be then, thenceforward and forever free."

Remember that up to this time the war had progressed for nearly a year and a half; that with the rebel flag flaunted within sight of the Federal capitol, and with our brave national defenders falling by thousands on every battle-field, pierced by rebel bullets, the "guarantees of the constitution" touching the institution of slavery, had been in the main faithfully observed. The great labor interest of the confederacy had been left untouched. The products of its plantations had fed and clothed and equipped its armies, and furnished the return cargoes for the fleets of blockade-runners which had eluded the vigilance of our vessels of war upon the coast. To have continued this immunity to the labor interest of the confederacy would have been alike inhuman to our troops in the field and disastrous to the Union cause everywhere. When, therefore, the first of January, 1863, arrived, and no state nor part of a state had accepted the conditions offered, President Lincoln issued an edict which offered freedom to more than three millions of bondmen, and sealed the fate of the rebel cause. In less than a year one hundred and thirty thousand able-bodied slaves, fitted for soldiers, seamen and military laborers, came within the Union lines, and were incorporated into the Union armies.

I have adverted to these facts, familiar, I doubt not, to most of you, to show the patient forbearance toward the institution of slavery of the chief magistrate who has been murdered at the instigation of slave-holding treason. In 1863, he offered still another overture to the slave-holders in rebellion, by annexing to his annual message to congress an Amnesty Proclamation promising free pardon to all persons who had participated in the rebellion, with restoration of all rights of property, except as to slaves, and in cases where the rights of third parties should have intervened, on condition that they should take and keep an oath to support, protect and defend the Constitution and the Union. The proclamation also provided that whenever, in any of the seceded

states, a number of persons not less in number than one-tenth of the votes cast in such state at the presidential election of 1860, who had taken and kept the prescribed oath, should re-establish a state government republican in form, it should be recognized as the true government of the state. The last reported speech which he ever made, delivered from a window of the executive mansion on the evening of the 12th inst.—four days ago—was mainly an appeal, embracing such arguments and illustrations as he alone of all the public men of the country knew so well how to employ, in favor of the recognition of the new state government of Louisiana.

In return for all this wealth of kindness and generosity extended to them from the commencement of his first term of office, what acknowledgment of gratitude do these traitorous slave-holders make? At a period of the war when the Federal arms are everywhere triumphant, when the rebel capitol is garrisoned by Federal troops, when the rebel president and his cabinet are skulking fugitives in the mountains, when the greatest of rebel generals with his army of twenty-two thousand soldiers are in Federal hands as prisoners of war, when not one foot of ground in the Mississippi valley and only one port upon the Atlantic seaboard are in rebel possession, and when neither the life nor the death of any man in the universe could save their pretended government from destruction, they stealthily creep like cowering savages into the presence of the chief magistrate, whose hand of fatherly forgiveness has been ever extended to them, and with no word, nor look, nor gesture of manly warning, strike him down, a murdered corse, at the feet of his own wife!

It is not for me to repeat to you the words of lamentation which this great calamity evokes. I *saw* the blanched cheeks and quivering lips of strong men unused to the relief of tears, on the announcement that this great and good executive had been stricken down at the hands of an assassin. If he had been ambitious, if he had clutched at arbitrary

power, if he had unnecessarily oppressed the people, if he had been indifferent to the burdens and sacrifices which they had borne in this, the great trial of their government, the national sorrow could not have been so great. But his heart was with the people. They had no public anxiety, nor joy, nor sorrow, which he did not share. Called to the administration of the duties of the presidency at a darker hour than any which had ever before shrouded the nation's prospects, he shrank from no responsibility, but calmly, patiently, hopefully, laboriously met the new and important civil and military complications which the rebellion developed, and brought law, and order, and republican liberty out of them, as far as the wisdom of mortal ruler could. That he bore up under his great task, that merely physical endurance could be strained so far, and not break, was the wonder of the people. Sitting there unpretendingly at his place in the executive rooms, with none of the cold formalities and hollow mockeries which hedge about the thrones of royalty, he gave audience from early morning to dewy evening to all who sought his presence. No weary, wounded or dying soldier ever appealed to the ear or to the heart of Abraham Lincoln in vain. No sorrowing wife or mother, yearning to visit the bedside or grave of husband or son, ever asked the influence of his name or office without receiving his sympathy or aid. His own party friends in congress sometimes differed with him. Foreign diplomats could not understand him. European monarchs affected to hold his uncouthness and humble origin in contempt. But there he was, a simple-mannered, large-hearted, clear-headed, uncorrupted and incorruptible executive representative of a people, struggling to defend and perpetuate forever a nationality of liberty, and to the great work in which he and they were engaged he devoted all the remarkable energies of his body and mind. Looking back over the momentous events of the last four years, do you think of any other man in private or public life who could have discharged this high

trust as well? He might have lacked dignity. I do not believe he made hypocrisy of his humility. He might have been wanting in some of the personal graces of propriety. I do not believe he simulated eccentricity. Wherever his presence or aid was needed, it was furnished. If he could aid the good cause by lending his attendance briefly at a sanitary fair, it was lent. If he could obtain sure guaranties of kindly attention to the sick and wounded by visiting the hospitals, he made the visitation. If he could inspire greater heart and hope among the brave boys down at the front by showing himself to them in the trenches or upon the battle-field, he performed that service. He was at the headquarters of Gen. Grant during the last struggles in front of Petersburg and Richmond, and knowing the intense interest of the people to learn of the results, he sent messages to them as a father would have done to his children at home, and in the moment of triumph, when most men in his position would have been justified for exhibitions of personal exultation, he simply wrote, "All seems to be well with us."

Men sometimes have said in their enthusiastic admiration of Abraham Lincoln, that they believed him equal in most qualities to Washington. I believe, even beyond this, that, in the discharge of the new, multiform and weighty trusts committed to him since he took his oath of office in 1861, he has developed a wiser and more comprehensive grasp of practical statesmanship than any other man ever invested with governmental power. And this man, thus exalted and now lamented, was scarcely known to the masses of the nation until 1858. I cannot learn, from the best accounts of his early life, that he had the advantages of even a common school education except for a very brief period. His parents were poor, and in his eighth year removed from Kentucky to the wilds of Indiana. Their destination was Spencer county. During the last few miles of the journey they were obliged to cut their own road through dense forests, and traversing a distance of eighteen miles they were

employed many days. In a log cabin of only two rooms, established in the wilderness, Abraham Lincoln passed the succeeding twelve years of his life. From his mother he learned to read, and after her death, which occurred when he was ten years old, he learned to write; and the first letter which he ever penned was directed to a traveling preacher, begging of him to come and preach a sermon over his mother's grave. The year after her death the family assembled to pay a last tribute to one they had deeply loved. At the age of twenty-one he removed with his father's family to Decatur, Illinois. He aided his father in the labors of the farm, sometimes hiring himself out to assist neighboring farmers, joined a volunteer company in the Black Hawk war, was elevated to the captaincy, attempted unsuccessfully to be a merchant, took up surveying, was elected as a Whig to the legislature in 1834, studied the legal profession, was admitted to practice three years afterwards, was twice subsequently elected to the legislature, was elected to congress in 1846, and in 1858 was selected by the Republicans of Illinois as a candidate for United States senator in opposition to Mr. Douglas. It was in the series of joint discussions before the people which ensued that he attracted the attention of the nation by his remarkable argumentative ability, and this and other qualifications which subsequently became known, caused him to be nominated as a presidential candidate in 1860. No man in public life had the ability to compress as many great truths into a small space as he. Let me read to you the brief remarks he made on the occasion of the dedication of the soldier's cemetery at Gettysburg:

> Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of the war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a resting-place for those who here gave their lives that the nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.
>
> But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot hallow this ground.

The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what *they did* here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us; that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

It has been a subject of wonder to many loyal men of the country that because of the opportunities which have been presented, the attempt should not have been made long ago to remove Mr. Lincoln by assassination. On his way to Washington in 1861, an attempt was made to throw from the track the car in which he was riding, on his journey through Ohio, and just as he was leaving Cincinnati, a hand grenade was found to have been secreted on board the cars. It was also discovered in time to frustrate the plot that an Italian assassin named Orsini had been hired by the slaveholders to murder the president as he should go through Baltimore. He passed through that city in disguise in the night previous to his expected arrival, and Mr. Seward, accompanied by a single companion, was in waiting for him in the Washington depot. God only knows what might have become of the nation had Mr. Lincoln fallen a victim to the plots of traitors and murderers at an early period of the war. A contest far more prolonged, more sanguinary and more devastating might have been the result, and ending, may be, in anarchy and ruin. But it was ordered in the good providence of Heaven that his strong arm and his wise councils should lead the nation through all its darkness and its dangers, and see its flag replanted on nearly every rampart from which it had been wrenched by treason. His mission was a high and holy one, and nobly has it been fulfilled. His body has indeed fallen by the hand of violence, and with its gaping wounds as it lies in state today, tells more eloquently than

can living tongue of the great wrong he has suffered in the nation's stead. But the record of his life will be perpetuated in glorious memory forever, guiding and encouraging the poor and the oppressed of all climes, and battling with more than the might of armies against monarchies, aristocracies, and all forms of despotism till the end of time.

I know that the inquiry has suggested itself to you, my friends, whether the man upon whom the presidential office has now fallen, will be equal to the trust. No man can tell. God only knows. He *has* been a good man. He has risen in defiance of slaveholding aristocrats in Tennessee to the highest honors which his state could confer, and when they plunged into the yawning hell of treason, and attempted to drag him with them, he resisted, and through personal sacrifices such as few men are called upon to endure, stood firmly by the Union cause. If the slave holders and their allies think they will experience greater mercy at the hands of President Johnson than has been extended to them by President Lincoln, they will be compelled to drink the cup of bitterest disappointment. He and the nation, in view of the tragedy which has just been committed, will be in no mood to send peace commissioners, or offers of pardon, or any form of toleration to traitors in arms. On the contrary, they will send powder and ball, and steel, and all the dread havoc of war, to the last den of slavery, till it shall be extirpated from the face of the country, and the nation and the world shall cry Amen! and Amen! Thus regenerated, there may be for years spasmodic exhibitions of hate by those who shall take the promise of loyalty upon their lips to mock at it in their hearts, but the great peril will have been safely passed, and with the aid of Him in whose justice there is neither variableness nor shadow of turning, the republic will be so firmly re-established that no shock of civil or foreign foes can ever move it from its place.